Occupational Hazard

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Occupational Hazard

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Summary

A roleswitch AU in which FBI profiler Hannibal buys a home haunted by the ghost of serial killer Will.

The entrance to the secret room is well-hidden, but Hannibal finds his way inside.
There's a light switch on the wall next to the doorway, and when Hannibal flicks it on a long series of hanging fluorescent lights flicker back to life, illuminating the kill room.
Tools and implements of torture hang from pegboard along the walls, and at the end of the narrow space a large red-painted storage chest sits.
There's a smell to the room. It's faint - dusty and dry and old - but Hannibal knows it for what it is. It's a death smell, and it's coming from the storage chest.

This story can be viewed as a part of my larger Identically Different role reversal AU, or as companion piece to Hungry Ghost. However, it can also stand on its own, and you will not need to read either of the above stories in order to understand this one.

There's a hidden room in the basement, but the realtor showing Hannibal around the neglected farmhouse doesn't seem to realize this.

The realtor has been talking up the old house, waxing poetic about its solid construction and the original wooden floors as he labors to convince Hannibal that beneath all the dust and disrepair that it is a real gem, and a steal at the price for which the county is willing to let it go. There's no hitch in his spiel as they descend into the basement, but the realtor comes to a halt a few steps above the basement landing.

Hannibal continues down into the basement, paying little attention as the realtor talks about the old workhouse of a furnace, the enduring quality of the decade-old renovations and how easily the space might be transformed into an ideal den, or a mancave, or a children's playroom or whatever use Hannibal might have for it.

The dimensions of the basement do not add up to what they ought to be, not when compared to the size of the rooms upstairs or the home's original floor plan.

That's not the only thing that feels off about the basement. There's a strange charge to the air down here, and when Hannibal looks back at the realtor he sees the man's unease. *He feels it too,* Hannibal thinks, *that's why he stopped short on the stairs.*

Then, reconsidering, he wonders if he's done something to make the man nervous, and if he is simply anxious at the prospect of Hannibal moving between himself and his only means of egress.

Hannibal knows perfectly well that he tends to have that kind of effect on people.

Putting the question aside, Hannibal gestures at the ceiling, which is lined with noise dampening titles, and asks, "Was the previous owner a musician?"

"Not professionally, so far as I'm aware," the realtor tells him. "I believe he was a psychiatrist."

Hannibal already knows as much. He also knows that the previous owner was named Will Graham, and that he disappeared a little over seven years ago, leaving his home unoccupied. He has recently been legally declared dead, and the sale of this house is one facet of the liquidation of his estate.

For reasons both personal and professional Hannibal makes a habit of staying abreast of missing person cases. Graham was a prominent enough member of the community that his disappearance stood out from the pack, though the FBi hadn't played a role in that investigation.

Hannibal suspects that the local police missed something.

It makes him curious.

The house is larger than Hannibal needs, and after years of standing empty has suffered direly from neglect, and the long commute to Quantico is likely to become tiresome quickly.

He buys it anyway.

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Hannibal understands that it would be in his best interest to report this crime scene immediately. Suspicions already hang around him like a miasma, and if he hesitates to take this to Jack at once there is a risk of people deciding he has some sort of vested interest in keeping it hidden.

He doesn't do that.

Instead, he explores.

It's a unique situation for Hannibal, being able to move around this kind of space by himself, without having to worry that too much of his admiration for what has been built here might show on his face.

Except - Hannibal does not feel himself to be alone.

It feels like there are eyes on him, watching him as he slips through the narrow gap between the surgical table and the wall to step deeper into the room.

At first, he considers if the sense of being under observation is simply a facet of the survival instinct that has served more or less well enough to keep him out of trouble, but he isn't capable of sustaining that kind of self-deception. Hannibal knows that he isn't alone.

There's a bitter, almost electric tang to the air, something apart from the faint scents of desiccation and old blood. It makes the air strum around him as he draws closer to the red chest.

The big metal chest is dented from the inside, the metal lid and sides bulging out in an irregular pattern of bumps. There's a crack along the seam at one of the trunk's corners, but it's so narrow that Hannibal couldn't have even slipped his pinky finger through it.

The chest has been padlocked closed, and Hannibal stoops over to examine it, hefting the big lock in his palm before standing again to look around.

He spots a heavy set of bolt cutters with long handles hanging on the wall, and retrieves them, passing beneath a pair of meat hooks that hang down from the ceiling. Those meat hooks are the only thing about the situation that makes Hannibal really nervous; he's never seen those in a kill room before.

It takes muscle, cutting through the padlock, but Hannibal has always been strong and that hasn't changed much with age. The padlock falls away, and Hannibal undoes the latch and lifts open the trunk's lid.

Inside, a withered husk of a corpse lies on its side, curled in on itself like a fetus. A jack knife lays beside one desiccated hand, and Hannibal sees that the man used that blade to open one of his wrists.

Blood has dried around his mouth, no more than black flecks now, and Hannibal wonders if a decision was made to die in this particular way, since death was coming regardless, or if goaded by thirst he simply acted in frantic desperation.

He knows that there is little logical basis to assume that the body in the storage locker is Will Graham, the former owner of the house and the kill room hidden within it, yet Hannibal feels certain that this is the case. He wonders how the man ended up trapped - did one of his victims get the upper hand and leave him there to die in revenge, or was it something else?

"You got careless," Hannibal says out loud. "Or else someone else got very, very lucky."

He remembers now, how shortly after Graham's colleagues reported him missing a body was discovered in the woods a few miles from here. That had been a point of interest not simply for its own sake, but because before they were able to check the dental records the working assumption was that the body must be Graham's.

Lucky enough to overpower Graham and doom him to a filthy and pathetic death, Hannibal amends to himself. *And lucky enough to escape the kill room, but that was as far as it went.* Then his luck ran out, and he died of whatever Graham had done to him before he could find help.

He reaches out with curiosity towards the body, unsure of what he intends to do, and above him the lights begin to flicker.

Hannibal looks up and sees the row of fluorescent lights above him begin to sway on its chains, as though moved by a stiff breeze.

A chill goes through him when he closes the lid on the storage container. He feels the hair on the back of his neck prickle and stand up, a unique experience that he can not remember ever having happened to him before.

Hannibal considers pressing the ghost further to see what it might do, but then he closes the latch on the trunk and leaves the kill room more or less the way he found it.

He needs time to think, by himself, about what to do next, but as he walks up the basement stairs Hannibal is aware of the presence following him.

It is visible, in brief moments, out of the corners of his eyes - a livid smear on the air that fades away like smoke when Hannibal tries to look directly at it.

It's dangerous, that presence. It's viciously angry, and in hideous pain, and whatever it might want from Hannibal won't be safe for him. And it's scared, too, terrified in a way that Hannibal can hardly keen.

Hannibal looks around closely for other bodies, but finds none on the property. The man in the trunk either disposed of them elsewhere, or was very good at hiding them.

A weariness falls on him, shortly after that.

The plan hadn't been to sleep here tonight. He's barely even begun to unpack, and the bedroom isn't set up yet, but leaving seems utterly impossible.

It's all Hannibal can do to find the box marked " *Linens* " and pull a blanket and pillow out of it, before stumbling upstairs and into the master bedroom. He sinks down onto the uncovered mattress, and a few seconds later everything fades to black.

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